

Standards of Courage

By
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The other day at lunch I saw something that really stuck with me. A colonel excused himself from his dining companions for a moment and went over to an Airman at another table. Discretely, he corrected her on improper wear of the uniform.

Is this something to be concerned about? Is this what leaders should take their time to do? The answer is yes. He corrected something the moment he saw it was wrong. It doesn't matter that it was something as seemingly trivial as the improper wear of the uniform. It's our duty as Airmen and especially as leaders, to correct things that are wrong – from simple uniform items to multi-million dollar budgets – and everything in-between. It's a combination of excellence and integrity. To put it more concretely, as I sit writing this in an airport gate area, awaiting my maintenance delayed flight, I sure hope someone is watching and correcting the mechanics fixing my jet.

In addition to integrity, it also took courage to correct that Airman. Sure, some might argue that as a senior officer, one should feel secure in correcting a lower-ranking person. In this case, rank doesn't matter. It takes moral courage to walk up to someone you don't know and tell them they're doing something wrong. Odds are, you're not making an instant friend and you're going to cause some hurt feelings.

It a responsibility all supervisors share. I knew of a supervisor who would not give feedback, or at least honest feedback, because once when he did so, the person he was trying to help started crying. I've known of others who just didn't take the time to correct seemingly minor infractions such as hair, uniforms or weight. The problem is that those seemingly minor issues become larger issues. These leaders set their Airmen up for failure. In a couple of cases I've seen, the lack of an early course correction resulted in being passed over for promotion a few years down the road.

It's not fun correcting people. Adversarial encounters rarely are a good time. However, it's our duty as Airmen and as leaders, to uphold the standards. That requires not only knowing the standards, but having the moral courage to tell someone they're wrong. You do it professionally, with as little fuss as needed, but none-the-less, you do it.

But it's not just supervisors.

A personal example and one that definitely shows courage is the Airman who recently corrected me on a uniform issue. We were at a squadron event, and he asked if he could speak to me. When we were out of earshot of everyone else, he very quietly told me that I was doing something the AFIs did not allow. I quickly corrected the issue and thanked him for helping me out.

That took courage. Moreover, he handled it fantastically. He pulled me aside, kept it very professional and helped me out instead of playing "gotcha!" I appreciated that correction, which helped me look better, and even more so, his courage in approaching me.

This is where Excellence comes in. We hold ourselves responsible, as Airmen of all ranks, to uphold standards and display excellence in what we do.

It's also about more than just correcting mistakes or issues you see. It's about setting your Airmen up for success. One of the hardest things I've had to do in my career was to defer a promotion until the Airmen could meet standards. Not my standards, but Air Force standards. However, as a leader, it was about more than just telling someone they were wrong. It doesn't just stop with the correction. After that, a good leader ensures that the Airman has the support needed to get back on track. That's what we do as leaders. We help our Airmen.

Have that morale courage to do what's right, no matter how unpleasant it may be. You'll be happy you did, and just importantly, those people you correct will most likely thank you in the long run.

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